

Op-ed

Nisqually Earthquake Retrospective

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It's been a year since the Nisqually earthquake rocked Central Puget Sound, registering a 6.8 magnitude and putting us through 40 seconds of strong ground motion. The 'quake sent thousands of people in Western Washington diving under tables and desks. School children were the stars, because years of practicing the "Drop, Cover and Hold" actions were rewarded. Adults had more mixed results; many put their lives in danger by fleeing buildings instead of following their children's example.

Any post-mortem on the Nisqually earthquake would give the government high marks on its response. Cities swiftly put into motion pre-established and well-exercised disaster plans. Throughout Western Washington, fire and police first responders, emergency management teams and many others made certain all bases were touched in assessing damage and caring for those most affected by the quake. Public information teams were quick to provide updates to citizens. By the end of the day, it appeared that a return to normalcy was in sight for most people.

Were we lucky or good? The honest answer is - both. The Nisqually earthquake was centered 30 miles southwest of Seattle, and 36 miles deep. Deep earthquakes can be serious, and this one was. But it would have been far more serious had it been of similar intensity and duration and had emanated from a shallow surface fault such as the Seattle Fault. The Nisqually 'quake is not the one we are most concerned about: it was bad, but it could have been much worse.

Why did the region do so well, at least in a comparative sense? One answer is that emergency managers throughout the region have been working to build capabilities in their communities. The Seattle Disaster Aid and Response Team (SDART) Program operated in Seattle had devoted the previous 8 years to the development of block organizations.

SDART team members are trained in six critical functions designed to help them take care of themselves and those around them. King County has been actively working to build regional partnerships by establishing an Inter-county Mutual Aid Agreement. A multi-year work effort is underway to establish a regional King County disaster response plan that will help governments provide a higher level of assistance to their citizens, and to one another, at a lower cost to the taxpayer.

Ironically, on the day of the earthquake a new Presidential administration cancelled Project Impact. Project Impact has transformed this region's approach from an emphasis on disaster preparedness and response efforts to one that includes disaster

mitigation as a crucial element. Piloted in this state by Seattle, Project Impact used federal grant money to develop public/private partnerships to create programs that mapped landslide and earthquake hazards, promoted business mitigation programs, and coordinated school and home retrofit programs.

The home retrofit program involves training contractors in current seismic code standards. Homeowners also can attend classes if they intend to do the work themselves, or if they simply want to learn more about what their contractor should do. Most contractor-completed retrofits cost about \$5000 or less, and the benefit of a house remaining attached to its foundation after a quake needs no explanation.

This program has been exported as the Regional Home Retrofit Program, serving 18 jurisdictions in collaboration with our regional partners. King and Pierce Counties worked together on projects that had a regional focus; the most ambitious is a study of the road transportation system the Port of Tacoma and the Port of Seattle conducted. The study found that the vulnerability of our bridges to earthquakes is significant, as is the economic impact of transportation interruptions to business. Bridge failures translate into jobs lost and businesses going bankrupt.

While transportation capacity is an everyday issue, without a comprehensive seismic retrofitting of our bridges, future earthquakes will have long-term, devastating impacts on our economic welfare. Whatever Project Impact's fate may be at the federal level, we intend to continue our commitment to sustaining disaster mitigation in Seattle and King County, as demonstrated by King County's actions to retrofit our most vulnerable bridges.

There is nothing we can do to stop the ground from shaking again in the future. We can make individual and collective choices to become better prepared for the next event, be it earthquake or terrorist attack. Individuals, families, businesses, schools, and governments all have roles to play. King County Executive Ron Sims and Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels are committed to disaster mitigation and preparedness. We feel fortunate to have elected officials like them leading and serving us. Their close working relationship promises to extend and even improve coordination within the region.

The anniversary of the Nisqually 'quake is a time to reflect on how much more we can accomplish together to make Central Puget Sound a disaster-resistant region. The next event may be more challenging; as emergency management professionals, and as a community, we need to continue to work together with a common vision: to save lives and protect property.